



The Hybrid Content of the Scalar Focus Modifier *Kua*³⁵ in the Southwest Mandarin Chinese

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Abstract. This paper is intended to investigate the semantics of *kua*³⁵ ‘(lit.) tasteless’ in the Qiannan dialect, a language spoken in the south of Qiannan Buyi and Miao Autonomous Prefecture of Guizhou Province of China. By drawing on the spirit of a bi-dimensional semantics framework, I propose that the adverbial *kua*³⁵ is a scalar focus modifier with hybrid content. On the one hand, *kua*³⁵ evokes a scale of a set of taste-related alternatives, ranking the alternatives of the set on the scale and singling out an alternative with maximum quantity. On the other hand, *kua*³⁵ implies that the focused element is the most undesirable one under discussion. The implications of the present study are twofold: firstly, it is the first time that *kua*³⁵ in the Qiannan dialect has been concerned in the spirit of generative linguistics; secondly, the investigation of *kua*³⁵ provides empirical evidence for exploring the connection between at-issue meaning and non-at-issue meaning.

Keywords: *kua*³⁵, the Qiannan dialect, scalar focus modifier, hybrid content

1 Introduction

The Qiannan dialect is the vernacular belonging to Southwest Mandarin, spoken in the south of Qiannan Buyi and Miao Autonomous Prefecture of Guizhou Province, which has rarely been discussed in the literature. In this article, a grammatical element *kua*³⁵, similar to the adverb *tsɿ*⁵³ ‘only’ in Mandarin Chinese, is taken to be a starting point for the lexical semantics study in the Qiannan dialect considering its typicality and uniqueness. The goal of this article is twofold: (i) to provide a principled account of the semantics of *kua*³⁵; (ii) to identify its grammatical status.

In Qiannan dialects, *kua*³⁵ can precede both verbs and adjectives, as shown below:

- (1) a. 他 寡 喝 酒。
 na³³ kua³⁵ xo³³ tɕiəu³⁵.
 he KUA drink wine
 ‘He prefers to drink.’
 b. 这 菜 寡 辣。
 tsɿ²¹ ts^hai²¹ kua³⁵ la⁴².
 this dish KUA spicy

‘The dish is particularly spicy.’

As shown above, *kua*³⁵ can modify both the verb *xo*³³*teiəu*³⁵ ‘drink wine’ (1a) and the adjective *la*⁴² ‘spicy’ (1b). However, the whole meaning of *kua*³⁵ is hard to be articulated. Thus, the following questions arise: (i) what the meaning of *kua*³⁵ is; (ii) what the grammatical status of *kua*³⁵ is; (iii) how the meaning of *kua*³⁵ can be accounted for in a bi-dimensional semantics framework.

To address the above problems, I will investigate the grammatical behaviors of *kua*³⁵ and explore its semantic constraint and semantic function to articulate its meaning in the spirit of a bi-dimensional semantics framework. Based on the behaviors of *kua*³⁵, I propose that *kua*³⁵ is a scalar focus modifier with hybrid content; its meaning is bi-dimensional, including at-issue and non-at-issue meanings. On the one hand, *kua*³⁵ activates a scale of a set of taste-related alternatives, ranking the alternatives of the set on the scale and singling out an alternative with maximum quantity. On the other hand, *kua*³⁵ expresses the speaker’s negative attitude, implying that the focused element is the most undesirable one under discussion.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 observes the grammatical behaviors of *kua*³⁵, consisting of describing its syntactic distributions and semantics. Section 3 identifies the grammatical status of *kua*³⁵. Section 4 is the conclusion.

2 Grammatical Behaviors of *Kua*³⁵

2.1 The Syntactic Distributions of *Kua*³⁵

As illustrated in (1), *kua*³⁵ can co-occur with verbs. Verbs are classified into stative and eventive verbs in terms of lexical aspect, in the sense that a situation involves either State or Event concerning temporal distinctions (Vendler 1967). First, let us examine the occurrence of *kua*³⁵ with different verb types:¹

- (2) a. *他 寡 喜欢 你。 (state)
 na³³ kua³⁵ ei³⁵ xuæ³³ ni³⁵.
 he KUA like you
 Intended: ‘He prefers to like you.’
 b. 他 寡 吃 菜。 (event)
 na³³ kua³⁵ ts^h₁⁵³ ts^h_{ai}²¹.
 he KUA eat vegetable
 ‘He prefers to eat vegetables.’

It can be seen that *kua*³⁵ is capable of co-occurring with the stative verb ei³⁵ xuæ³³ ‘like’ (2a), while incapable of co-occurring with the eventive verb ts^h₁⁵³ ‘eat’ (2b), suggesting that the meaning of *kua*³⁵ has to do with Event.

¹ Notice that the mark “Intended” is the abbreviation for “Intended reading” denoting that the ungrammatical/unacceptable sentence is interpreted literally; the asterisk denotes that the sentence is ungrammatical; the mark “#” denotes that the sentence is grammatical but inappropriately used; the abbreviations used in the glosses are as follows: KUA: the undefined grammatical element *kua*³⁵; CL: classifier; DE: the structural particle traditionally called the complement marker; phonological notations used in this paper refer to Zhou (2012).

Although *kua*³⁵ is capable to co-occur with eventive verbs, it still imposes a selectional restriction on their types, as exemplified below:

- (3) a. 他 寡 吃 菜。 (taste-related)
 na³³ kua³⁵ ts^hɿ⁵³ ts^hai²¹.
 he KUA eat vegetable
 ‘He prefers to eat vegetables.’
 b.* 他 寡 游泳。 (non-taste-related)
 na³³ kua³⁵ ʔiəu⁵³ ʔioŋ³⁵.
 he KUA swim
 Intended: ‘He prefers to swim.’

Contrast (3) shows that *kua*³⁵ can only co-occur with the taste-related verb phrase *ts^hɿ⁵³ts^hai²¹* ‘eat vegetables’ (3a), while cannot co-occur with the non-taste-related verb phrase *ʔiəu⁵³ʔioŋ³⁵* ‘swim’ (3b), indicating that the meaning of *kua*³⁵ has a bearing on taste-related events.

Eventive verbs can be subdivided into activity, achievement, and accomplishment in terms of whether the situation described by a verb is telic or atelic in a temporal sense. Consider the following set of examples:

- (4) a. 他 寡 吃。 (telic: activity)
 na³³ kua³⁵ ts^hɿ⁵³.
 he KUA eat
 ‘He keeps eating.’
 b. 他 寡 *吃到 / *吃完。 (atelic: achievement/accomplishment)
 na³³ kua³⁵ ts^hɿ⁵³-tau³⁵ / ts^hɿ⁵³-ʔuə⁵³.
 he KUA eat-to / eat-up
 Intended: ‘He keeps doing the “eat-to”/ “eat-up” action.’

Example (4) shows that *kua*³⁵ imposes a lexical aspectual restriction on the type of events. In particular, when *kua*³⁵ precedes the activity verb root *ts^hɿ⁵³* ‘eat’, (4a) is grammatical, whereas, the attachments of *kua*³⁵ with the achievement verb *ts^hɿ⁵³-tau³⁵* ‘eat-to’ and the accomplishment verb *ts^hɿ⁵³-ʔuə⁵³* ‘eat up’ lead to the ungrammaticality of (4b), indicating that the semantic requirement of *kua*³⁵ has to do with atelicity.

Turning now to the co-occurrence of *kua*³⁵ with adjectives, as shown below:

- (5) a. 这 菜 寡 辣。 (taste-related adjective)
 tsɿ²¹ ts^hai²¹ kua³⁵ la⁴².
 this dish KUA spicy
 ‘The dish is particularly spicy.’
 b.* 他 寡 高。 (non-taste-related adjective)
 na³³ kua³⁵ kau³³.
 he KUA tall
 Intended: ‘He is particularly tall.’

Contrast (5) shows that *kua*³⁵ only occurs with the taste-related adjective *la*⁴² ‘spicy’ (5a), while rejects the non-taste-related adjective *kau*³³ ‘tall’ (5b), indicating that the meaning of *kua*³⁵ is sensitive to taste-related properties.

To conclude, *kua*³⁵ is associated with taste-related eventualities rather than non-taste-related ones, indicating that the meaning of *kua*³⁵ is lexically restricted.

2.2 The Semantics of *Kua*³⁵

Except for being used as an adverb, the grammatical element *kua*³⁵ has other usages in the Qiannan dialect, such as a compound noun *kua*³⁵*fu*²¹ ‘widow’, a fixed causative verb phrase *kua*³⁵*tu*²¹*tsɿ*³⁵ ‘make someone hungry’, and a compound adjective *kua*³⁵*tæ*²¹ ‘tasteless’, as shown below:

- (6) a. 她 是 个 寡妇。 (noun)
 na³³ sɿ²¹ ko²¹ kua³⁵fu²¹.
 she be CL widow
 ‘(Negative) She is a widow.’
- b. 这 菜 寡 肚子。 (verb)
 tsɿ²¹ ts^hai²¹ kua³⁵ tu²¹tsɿ³⁵.
 this dish KUA belly
 ‘(Negative) This dish is easy to make one feel hungry.’
- c. 这 菜 味道 寡淡。 (adjective)
 tsɿ²¹ ts^hai²¹ ʔuei²¹tau²¹ kua³⁵tæ²¹.
 this dish flavor tasteless
 ‘(Negative) This dish is tasteless.’

In (6), except for the noun phrase *kua*³⁵*fu*²¹ ‘widow’, the other verb phrases involve eating-related events, especially *kua*³⁵ being used as the adjective. Furthermore, the above examples can express some negative implications, for instance, unluckiness. It has been argued that adverbs are grammaticalized from their corresponding content words, whose meanings are deeply influenced by their lexical semantics (Athanasiadou 2007). On this basis, the meanings of adverbs may preserve their lexical semantics and even extend distinct grammatical meanings during semantic change. In line with this, the adjectival *kua*³⁵ is used to describe a bland taste, implying that the speaker’s desired flavor is not prominent and thus (s)he is disappointed. When *kua*³⁵ is grammaticalized as an adverb, these mixed contents determine the semantic restriction imposed by the adverbial *kua*³⁵.

So far, we have examined the behaviors of *kua*³⁵ and explained why it always selects taste-related verbs. In what follows, I will discuss the grammatical status of *kua*³⁵ by investigating its semantic function and semantic requirement.

3 The Grammatical Status of *Kua*³⁵

3.1 *Kua*³⁵ as a Scalar Focus Modifier

In general, the interpretation of *kua*³⁵ may scope over either verbal predicates or plural objects, giving rise to ambiguities out of context. However, the scope ambiguity can no longer exist by means of contrast, as shown below:

- (7) a. 他 寡 吃 菜, 没咋 喝 酒。
 na³³ kua³⁵ ts^hɿ⁵³ ts^hai²¹, mei³⁵tɕa⁴² xo³³ tɕiəu³⁵.
 he KUA eat vegetable barely drink wine
 ‘He eats a lot of vegetables while barely drinking wine.’
- b. 他 寡 吃 菜, 没咋 吃 饭。

na³³ kua³⁵ ts^h₁⁵³ ts^hai²¹, mei³⁵ tsa⁴² ts^h₁⁵³ fæ²¹.

he KUA eat vegetable barely eat rice

'He eats a lot of vegetables while barely eating rice.'

Sentence (7a) means that between the two different types of ingestion events including eating and drinking, the event containing *kua*³⁵ involves maximum quantity by means of contrast. Specifically, *kua*³⁵ contrasts with the diminisher *mei*³⁵ tsa⁴² 'barely', leading to the contrast between the verb phrase ts^h₁⁵³ ts^hai²¹ 'eat vegetable' and the verb phrase xo³³ tɕiəu³⁵ 'drink wine'. Note that without *kua*³⁵ the quantitative meaning of 'a lot of' would be canceled. In this sense, *kua*³⁵ can maximize the quantities involved in the adjacent verb phrase, denoting that it is this event that involves maximum quantity. By contrast, sentence (7b) means that between the same type of ingestion events including eating vegetables and rice, the event containing *kua*³⁵ involves maximum quantity. Similarly, *kua*³⁵ can maximize the quantities involved in the adjacent verb phrase tsh₁⁵³ fæ²¹ 'eat rice', denoting that it is this event that involves maximum quantity. To sum up, *kua*³⁵ can apply to taste-related predicates with heterogeneous or homogeneous alternatives.

Let us turn now to the situation in which *kua*³⁵ precedes taste-related adjectives:

(8) a. 这 菜 寡 辣, 没 香。

ts₁²¹ ts^hai²¹ kua³⁵ la⁴², mei³⁵ ɕiaŋ³³.

this dish KUA spicy not yummy

'The dish tastes particularly spicy but not yummy.'

b. 这 菜 寡 辣, 没 咸。

ts₁²¹ ts^hai²¹ kua³⁵ la⁴², mei³⁵ ɕiæ⁵³.

this dish KUA spicy not salty

'The dish is particularly spicy but lightly salted.'

As is known, the ingredients of a dish may consist of pepper, salt, sugar, and so on, of which each ingredient has its corresponding adjective for describing the properties of flavors. Namely, the dish presupposes those complex flavors, which can be regarded as a set of flavors. Similar to (7a), the co-occurrence of *kua*³⁵ with the la⁴² 'spicy' denotes that the spicy flavor is particularly strong (8a). Note that la⁴² and its contrasting adjective ɕiaŋ³³ 'yummy' are ordered, so the speaker should taste the dish first and then give a comment. In this sense, the two adjectives are heterogeneous. Besides, *kua*³⁵ can co-occur with homogeneous adjectives (8b), for instance, la⁴² 'spicy' and ɕiæ⁵³ 'salty' can be perceived simultaneously. In short, *kua*³⁵ can strengthen the degrees involved in taste-related adjectives with heterogeneous or homogeneous nature.

A closer look at the above interpretations demonstrates that *kua*³⁵ introduces a set of taste-related events, contextually yielding different interpretations. Our concern here is with the number of alternatives in a set of taste-related events to identify how *kua*³⁵ quantifies over the events. See the examples below:

(9) 他 寡 吃 菜。

na³³ kua³⁵ ts^h₁⁵³ ts^hai²¹.

he KUA eat vegetable

i. 'Of the three types of food he ate, including vegetables, meat, and eggs, the proportion of eating vegetables is particularly high.'

ii. ‘Between the two types of food he ate, including vegetables and meat, the proportion of eating vegetables is particularly higher than that of eating meat.’

#iii. ‘There is only one food, and that is vegetables, and he keeps eating a lot.’

In (9), *kua*³⁵ co-occurs with the verb phrase *ts^h7⁵³ts^hai²¹* ‘eat vegetables’, evoking a ranking set of the focused event on a scale of the eating-related event. Note that the homogeneous set of the event is comprised of eating-related sub-events. The interpretations shown above suggest that *kua*³⁵ has a semantic requirement for the number of eating-related alternatives in a set. On the one hand, the number of eating-related alternatives should not be less than two (9i-ii). Otherwise, the occurrence of *kua*³⁵ would be inappropriate (9iii). On the other hand, the focused event selected should involve a maximum quantity. The sentence involving *kua*³⁵ can be decoded if the two requirements are met. It should be noted that the selecting procedure of *kua*³⁵ applying to a heterogeneous set of sensory events is the same as (9). For brevity, I will leave out the process.

The situation is slightly different when *kua*³⁵ evokes a ranking set of taste-related states, as shown below:

(10) a. 这 菜 寡 辣。

ts₁²¹ ts^hai²¹ kua³⁵ la⁴².

this dish KUA spicy

‘Of all the flavors in the dish, including salty, sweet, sour, and spicy flavor, the spicy flavor is particularly prominent.’

b. #这 盐巴 寡 咸。

ts₁²¹ ?iæ⁵³pa³³ kua³⁵ɕiæ⁵³.

this salt KUA salty

Intended: ‘The salty flavor of salt is particularly prominent.’

In (10a), the flavor of the dish is artificially complex. Namely, the dish is presupposed to contain more than at least two flavors, which meets the semantic requirements of *kua*³⁵. Then, *kua*³⁵ is used to single out the flavor with the maximum quantity under discussion. Notice that the pungency degree is a rating of capsaicin contents to some extent, in the sense that for people, a higher degree of spiciness than other flavors means that the amount of capsaicin is higher than that of other flavors. By contrast, salt is naturally salty and has no extra flavors, as shown in (10b). Put differently, salt is presupposed to have only one flavor, which cannot meet the semantic requirements of *kua*³⁵. However, given that the salt in (10b) is supposed to have a complex flavor by artificial seasoning and the salty flavor is the most prominent one in the artificial salt, then the use of *kua*³⁵ is appropriate. Thus, the appropriateness of using *kua*³⁵ depends on whether the number of taste-related alternatives is equal to or greater than two.

To sum up, the semantic function and semantic requirement of *kua*³⁵ can be summarized as follows:

- *Kua*³⁵ can evoke a ranking set of taste-related alternatives;
- The number of the alternatives required by *kua*³⁵ should not be less than two;
- The alternative selected by *kua*³⁵ must involve maximum quantity.

The characteristics of *kua*³⁵ are in accord with what is called scalar focus modifiers. Scalar focus modifiers are a subset of focus modifiers. Unlike degree modifiers, scalar

focus modifiers are not inherently scalar but can invoke alternatives on a scale. According to Nevalainen (1994), scalar focus modifiers are slightly different from focus modifiers, in the sense that scalar focus modifiers not only invoke alternatives on a scale but also rank the focus on that scale, usually with other elements of the same type (qualities, events, persons, etc.); this ranking often signals discourse evaluation such as expectation (see details in König 1991). In this sense, the semantic function of *kua*³⁵ is selecting, whose additional meaning involves speakers. In what follows, let us examine what the additional meaning *kua*³⁵ contributes to.

3.2 The Negative Meaning of *Kua*³⁵

As mentioned above, scalar focus modifiers can encode expressivity, in the sense that they reinforce the qualities of an entity to express the speaker's perspective on the entity. Except for ranking alternatives, *kua*³⁵ singles out the alternative with maximum quantity as a focus to express some expressive meanings in the current situation. In order to decode the expressive meaning of *kua*³⁵ and make our analysis more convincing, I will take another focus modifier *tsɿ*⁵³ 'only' as a reference in that it is commonly used to make an objective report, as exemplified below:

- (11) a. 寡 吃 菜 对 身体 没 好。
*kua*³⁵ *tsʰɿ*⁵³ *tsʰai*²¹ *tuei*²¹ *sən*³³ *tʰi*³⁵ *mei*³⁵ *xau*³⁵.
kua eat vegetable for body not good
 'Eating a lot of vegetables is bad for health.'
- b. 只 吃 菜 对 身体 没 好。
*tsɿ*⁵³ *tsʰɿ*⁵³ *tsʰai*²¹ *tuei*²¹ *sən*³³ *tʰi*³⁵ *mei*³⁵ *xau*³⁵.
 only eat vegetable for body not good
 'Eating vegetables only is bad for health.'

Common sense tells us that eating vegetables is good for our health because they can supplement one's vitamins or minerals. In such a case, eating vegetables may be regarded as "positive". However, given that a man only eats vegetables instead of meat and eggs, which leads to nutritional imbalance; in such a circumstance, eating vegetables may be regarded as "negative". In other words, whether eating vegetables is considered "positive" or "negative" is contextually dependent. Examples (11a) and (11b) mean that the speaker believes that eating vegetables is bad for health. It can be seen that *kua*³⁵ and *tsɿ*⁵³ can occur in a negative context, indicating that both of them are compatible with negative meanings.

Then what about the occurrence of *kua*³⁵ and *tsɿ*⁵³ in a positive context? Consider the following contrast:

- (12) a. #寡 吃 菜 对 身体 才 好。
*kua*³⁵ *tsʰɿ*⁵³ *tsʰai*²¹ *tuei*²¹ *sən*³³ *tʰi*³⁵ *tsʰai*⁵³ *xau*³⁵.
kua eat vegetable for body then good
 Intended: "Only by eating a lot of vegetables can you become healthy."
- b. 只 吃 菜 对 身体 才 好。
*tsɿ*⁵³ *tsʰɿ*⁵³ *tsʰai*²¹ *tuei*²¹ *sən*³³ *tʰi*³⁵ *tsʰai*⁵³ *xau*³⁵.
 only eat vegetable for body then good
 'Only by eating vegetables alone can you become healthy.'

The above contrast means that the speaker believes that only eating vegetables can make one healthy. In such a case, eating vegetables is regarded as “positive”. However, the addition of *kua*³⁵ leads to infelicity in (12a), while the addition of *tsɿ*⁵³ is felicitous in (12b), indicating that *kua*³⁵ is sensitive to the expressive context.

Compared with (11) and (12), *kua*³⁵ can only occur in a negative context while *tsɿ*⁵³ can occur in either a negative or positive context. Put differently, the meaning of *kua*³⁵ is conventionally negative while the meaning of *tsɿ*⁵³ is contextually dependent. It can be concluded that *kua*³⁵ is what Gutzmann (2011) called hybrid content expressive modifier, in the sense that the meaning of such a modifier has both at-issue and non-at-issue meanings. In short, *kua*³⁵ is a scalar focus modifier with hybrid content.

4 Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the adverbial *kua*³⁵ in the Qiannan dialect is a scalar focus modifier with hybrid content, bundling with descriptive and expressive meanings. The implications of this paper are twofold: firstly, grounded on the view of a bi-dimensional semantics framework, I take the first step to examine the semantics of *kua*³⁵ in the Qiannan dialect; secondly, the investigation of *kua*³⁵ provides empirical evidence for exploring the relevance between at-issue meaning and non-at-issue meaning.

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